

The Amish

In American Culture

THE AMISH People in America are not a new religious sect, but a very old one, stemming from the Mennonites, who arose directly out of the Reformation struggles of the sixteenth century. Mennonites read the Bible seriously, but more than that they took it seriously. They said a man does not become a Christian by being baptized, nor even by joining a church, but by having an inner regeneration of soul proved by outward behavior. They agreed with Luther that every man has the right to pray and have faith in God, whenever and however he wants, without the sanction of a preacher or priest. They taught that a Christian must separate himself from wickedness and bring his entire behavior under the lordship of Christ.

The idea spread rapidly but everywhere met terrific opposition and cruel persecution. The movement finally dwindled in enthusiasm. Many of those who escaped gave up the idea of evangelism and became the quiet farmers of the hills and valleys of Switzerland and the Palatinate.

The Amish group developed out of the Mennonites from 1693 to 1697. Jacob Ammann, a young Mennonite bishop of Switzerland, emphasized the need for more serious observance of what he called "the old ground and foundation" and succeeded in gaining a considerable following. He was not a reformer, but a defender of the early Mennonite tradition in dress and doctrine. To this very day the Amish have retained the externals of a former way of life, together with a strong devotion to sixteenth-century Mennonite ideals.

With Mennonites, they came to America in large numbers after 1740, and they live side by side, often in the same community. While both share a similar background, the distinction is largely



An Amish Barn-raising

one of dress and manner of worship. A conservative estimate of the number of Amish, including children, would seem to be about 60,000.

Each local community is divided into church districts, and each contains about twenty-five to forty families. The size of districts is limited by horse and buggy transportation, and because worship is held in homes only a limited number of people can be accommodated. There is generally one bishop for each of the districts, as well as two to four preachers and a deacon. The total number of church districts is over 300.

The largest group is not the Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, settlement as is commonly supposed. The greatest concentration is in Holmes and adjoining counties in northeastern Ohio. Next in size is the group in Elkhart and surrounding counties in northeastern Indiana. The oldest, richest, and third largest group is the settlement centering in Lancaster County. Other settlements are located in central and western Pennsylvania and in Iowa, Illinois, Kansas, Michigan, Oklahoma, Delaware, Virginia, Oregon, North Dakota, Missouri, and Ontario, Canada. A few miles east of

Sarasota, Florida, there is a winter migratory settlement. New settlements have begun in Paraguay and Honduras.

Religion is the axis around which the Amishman's world revolves. Whole households come to "preaching" held every other Sunday. Men, women, and children gather in the home of a member for worship. This is made possible often by the removable partitions and doors between the large rooms on the first floor of the house. Everybody shakes hands on Sunday morning, and ministers greet each other with the holy kiss as commanded in the Bible (I Thessalonians 5:26). Preaching begins about nine or earlier and ends after noon. The service consists of two sermons, sometimes silent prayers as well as oral, which are read, testimonies from ministers, and singing.

Children learn early to sit attentively, although games with handkerchiefs (making objects such as mice) and "half-moon" pies (in Pennsylvania) or crackers served to toddlers during mid-service help to minimize their restlessness. The social hour and lunch (coffee, bread, butter, pickles, red beets, and pie) following the service is a valuable part of the meeting. Men discuss religious subjects and also the happenings of the day, farming, and personal and community problems. Women do likewise. Young men gather about the barn or buggies for jokes, good-natured teasing, and conversation related to courtship.

The Sunday meeting is but an outward manifestation of an Amishman's religion. How religion controls his thinking, with what purpose he lives, and why he acts as he does are far more significant. Without religion the Amishman could not be Amish; he cannot separate his belief from eating, sleeping, and working. He simply could not exist without it. The Amish support no "revivals," missionary activity, or evangelistic activities of their own. Their religion is directed toward making the Amishman an upright man and a first-rate farmer, and that is all. Given the force of custom, his faith produces a wholesome simplicity of life relatively free from snobbishness and the worldliness he abhors. A few of the young people, however, rebel against the extreme formalism and find it impossible to adjust.

Ministers are chosen from their own congregations by lot for life, and there is no specialized training. They receive no salary. There is no need for constructing and maintaining a costly church building for worship when services can be held in the homes. Not even a written membership list is kept. Why should they bother with one, when everyone knows everyone else?

There is a popular notion that an Amishman has plenty of good hard cash, and that he can dig it out of his pants pocket on demand. This idea is unfounded, but easy to believe because he often pays his bills in cash. He feeds his family well, but he does not have large investments in commercial enterprises. His money is put back into the land. As a whole his income is probably less than that of the average farmer. He does not have the expense of upkeep on automobiles and some high-cost machinery, but his gross income is somewhat limited. He is not a "money grubber," but he firmly believes in saving. Security for him is not just money, but a family, a religion, and a farm. He wants no more land than necessary to raise a family. Except for the tobacco crop in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and a few other exceptions, such as dairying, he generally does not engage in specialized farming. Of course, every father strives to provide a farm for each of his sons.

Contrary to popular opinion, the Amish possess one of the richest folk arts in America. Much of their decorative art belongs unmistakably to the "Pennsylvania Dutch" type. One can find such motifs as the dove, rose, heart, tree of life, and peacock on such articles as "show" towels, illuminated hand-drawing, cards of friendship, and needlecraft. It must be noted, however, that while this artwork is frequently found in their homes today, it is largely representative of an earlier period; for not much of it is being produced by present-day Amish. But they do produce an art of their own. This is manifested in decorative designs on furniture, family registers, and illuminated verse, and in needlecraft objects of various kinds.

Amish religion has not thwarted their love of color. Their flourishing flower gardens are proof of this. They favor plain but bright colors—pur-



Amish Children

ple, pink, red, orange, and blue are common. Neither do they reject all colorful designs in embroidery as "worldly," as did some colonial religious iconoclasts. China closets, colorful dishes, and large picture calendars, items which combine utility with beauty, are a particular delight.

Visiting the "Freindschaft" (kinship) is a dominant form of pastime among the Amish. Every other Sunday is usually open for visiting, but in a few places Sunday school is alternated with church service during the summer months. Special days are also observed by visiting, such as New Year's Day, Epiphany (Old Christmas), Easter Sunday, Ascension Day, Pentecost, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. In some localities Easter Monday and the day following Christmas are also hallowed, a survival of European times.

Weddings, which are held during November and December, also provide opportunity for fellowship and enjoyment. An abundance of good food—chicken, turkey, ham, dressing, mashed potatoes, gravy, cole slaw, celery, peaches, prunes, pickles, jams, pies, cookies, and many varieties of cake—is served. The "Eck" (bridal corner) is especially decorated with colorful dishes, fancy layer cakes, and fruit.

The occasions which provide the best opportu-

nity for association of young people are the "singings" after chores are done on Sunday evening. The young man dresses in his best, brushes his hat and suit, and makes sure that his horse and "rig" are in good taste. He may take his sister to the singing, or if he takes his girl he will arrange to pick her up about dusk, perhaps at her home or at the end of a lane or crossroad. In some localities the young folks meet in villages to pair off in couples. Considerable secrecy pervades these festivities through the entire period of courtship, regardless of length.

Young folks also get together at husking bees, weddings, apple "snitzings" (apple-peeling parties), and frolics. In addition to taking his girl home after the singing, the boy who has a steady girl will see her every week or two on Saturday night. Before entering the home of his girl he makes sure that the old folks are in bed. When his flashlight focuses on her window, the girl knows that her lover has arrived. They spend several hours together in the "sitting room," but they do not leave the home on such occasions.

The blue gate legend, that an Amishman paints his gate blue to announce to the world that he has a marriageable daughter, is entirely a myth. Actually, in an Amish community there is no need, much less a desire, to advertise a marriageable daughter, either to the Amish or to the stranger, since they marry only members of the same faith and all members know the status of all other families.

Perhaps less is known about the history of the Amish costume than of any other aspect of their material culture. We know that it is very old, and that it conforms favorably with styles once common in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Dress varies in each local community, so only general features can be noted here.

Buttons are used on men's shirts, trousers, and underwear, and on children's dresses, but hooks-and-eyes are required on men's coats and vests, especially on Sunday clothing. Men's trousers are the broad-fall type, also called "barn-door britches" (like sailor pants), and they are homemade as are most Amish garments.

Peculiar to men's dress (for members) is the "Mootsa," a special kind of coat with a split tail which must always be worn for church. The origin of this coat is yet a mystery, but it is thought to come from the "shadbelly" coat of former times when men wore long coats split at the back for riding horseback. Formerly these long coattails were fastened to the sleeves with buttons to prevent them from becoming soiled while traveling. Men wear dark Sunday suits and plain-colored shirts. Most homemade shirts have no collars. In many localities suspenders are also homemade. The beard is required of all adult members of the church, and it must begin to appear at the time of baptism or marriage, depending on the local practice.

The women also wear plain colors, often black, blue, red, purple, or brown. The "Holsduch" (kerchief or cape) and apron are part of the full Sunday dress as are black bonnets and shawls. The Amish bonnet is believed to originate from Quaker costume. The "Kapp" (prayer veil) worn by teen-age girls is black, but once they are married the white one is worn. The white one is also worn by the school and school-age girls.

The prayer veil is worn not only for worship but all the time. This observance is a "sign of authority" based upon Bible teaching (I Corinthians 11) and symbolizes for them the woman's proper relationship to God and man. She "is to be veiled because of the angels." Also, the woman is not to have her hair cut. The Amish believe that God has called them to be a "nonconformed" (Romans 12:1) people, a "peculiar" people.

Amish parents want their children to acquire the skills of reading, writing, and ciphering. For this reason they want their children to attend the elementary schools. After completing the grades, however, they believe that Amish youth should get their instruction in farming and management at home. This vocation, they contend, does not require higher education, and such schooling is "a waste of time." Too much "book learning" is not good.

Their belief in the one-room country school

is an attempt to maintain the integrity of their life, particularly family and community life. They desire above all to keep their children from secular influences, such as movies. They are against school consolidation because it would expose their children to new influences beyond family control. Therefore, many communities have begun to maintain their own private parochial schools. But a new problem arises in that the Amish themselves do not attend colleges to prepare for teaching positions, so it becomes necessary for them to hire "outside" teachers.

The child acquires a knowledge of skills largely through association with his parents in learning to work. From the start boys are introduced to farming operations, and they almost invariably develop a keen interest in farming. Girls are trained to perform small favors for their mothers and to practice the arts of cooking and housekeeping.

The Amish are not ignorant of world events. They pay their taxes gladly, ask little of the government, and want to be left alone to "work out their salvation with fear and trembling." But there is wholesome humor too, and Amish hospitality is unsurpassable!

It is their hope that by living a peaceful and Godly life they can witness to a higher way of life. They do not entertain any utopian ideas about possessing the whole world or converting it. They attest that there will always be enough people to perform the task of the magistracy, the police, and the military. But they believe that candidates for the Biblical way of life, which non-resistant and obedient Christians alone can fulfill, are altogether too few.

The sixty settlements of Amish people in North America are small brotherhoods of a kind necessary to national life and well-being. The foundations of any civilization depend on the moral quality of the people living in it. Where better can such virtues as neighborliness, self-control, good will, and co-operation be found than in small communities? Perhaps the modern, hurried, worried, and fearful world could learn something from them.